

Committee on Government Reform

Tom Davis, Chairman



MEDIA ADVISORY

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Government Reform Committee to Review SARS Threat ***“HHS Secretary Thompson to Testify at Hearing”***

What: Government Reform Committee oversight hearing on “The SARS Threat: Is the Nation’s Public Health Network Prepared for a Possible Epidemic?”

When: Wednesday, April 9, 2003, immediately following 10:00 a.m. Business Meeting
(committee vote to confer immunity on William Bulger and Francis Salemme)

Where: Room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building

This hearing will focus on our public health system’s response capabilities at the Federal, state, and local level.

While the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) appears to be a naturally occurring disease, it provides a valid test of the nation’s preparedness to handle a public health threat of this exact nature or a bioterrorist attack. The 2001 bioterrorism legislation provided substantial new funding for states, localities, and hospitals to boost preparedness. The SARS threat is the first challenge to our public health system’s capabilities and provides us with a chance to evaluate existing procedures and safeguards.

Background:

SARS is a new human disease that is suspected to have originated in the Guangdong province of China in the fall of 2002. As of today, there have been over 2,460 SARS cases

reported worldwide, with 98 deaths. Although no deaths in the U.S. have been reported, the country has approximately 90 suspected cases in 27 different states, with the highest concentration in New York and California.

SARS typically begins with fever and other flu-like symptoms, such as muscle aches and headache, which generally last for two to seven days. This phase is followed by respiratory symptoms, including coughing and difficulty breathing. About ten to 20 percent of SARS patients develop respiratory failure and require mechanical ventilation to survive. The fatality rate for SARS is three percent.

Officials have not reached any definitive conclusion on the cause of the virus and which, if any, environmental factors are contributing to the rapid spread of the disease. The Center for Disease Control's (CDC) leading hypothesis is that a new type of corona virus, which causes the common cold, also causes SARS. The transmission of SARS appears similar to the transmission of the common cold. Droplets carried in the air through coughing or sneezing possibly spread the virus. It is also possible that coming into contact with objects that are contaminated can transmit SARS more broadly.

There is currently no cure for the disease. The CDC is testing various antiviral drugs against SARS to see if an effective treatment can be found. The CDC has also publicized that, in collaboration with WHO and other laboratories, it is working to develop a research test to identify antibodies of this new coronavirus. While no treatments are known to be effective yet, antibodies, antiviral drugs, and vaccines could be used to treat these types of diseases.

Panel One Witness:

The Honorable Tommy G. Thompson, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services

Panel One Witnesses:

Janet Heinrich, Director, Public Health Issues, U.S. General Accounting Office

Dr. Margaret Hamburg, Vice President for Biological Programs, The Nuclear Threat Initiative

Dr. David Goodfriend, Director, Loudoun County Health Department

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